

Qualitative and descriptive research: Data type versus data analysis

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Qualitative and descriptive research methods have been very common procedures for conducting research in many disciplines, including education, psychology, and social sciences. These types of research have also begun to be increasingly used in the field of second language teaching and learning. The interest in such methods, particularly in qualitative research, is motivated in part by the recognition that L2 teaching and learning is complex. To uncover this complexity, we need to not only examine how learning takes place in general or what factors affect it, but also provide more in-depth examination and understanding of individual learners and their behaviors and experiences. Qualitative and descriptive research is well suited to the study of L2 classroom teaching, where conducting tightly controlled experimental research is hardly possible, and even if controlled experimental research is conducted in such settings, the generalizability of its findings to real classroom contexts are questionable. Therefore, *Language Teaching Research* receives many manuscripts that report qualitative or descriptive research.

The terms qualitative research and descriptive research are sometimes used interchangeably. However, a distinction can be made between the two. One fundamental characteristic of both types of research is that they involve naturalistic data. That is, they attempt to study language learning and teaching in their naturally occurring settings without any intervention or manipulation of variables. Nonetheless, these two types of research may differ in terms of their goal, degree of control, and the way the data are analyzed.

The goal of descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. This research is more concerned with what rather than how or why something has happened. Therefore, observation and survey tools are often used to gather data (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). In such research, the data may be collected qualitatively, but it is often analyzed quantitatively, using frequencies, percentages, averages, or other statistical analyses to determine relationships. Qualitative research, however, is more holistic and often involves a rich collection of data from various sources to gain a deeper understanding of individual participants, including their opinions, perspectives, and attitudes. Qualitative research collects data qualitatively, and the method of analysis is

also primarily qualitative. This often involves an inductive exploration of the data to identify recurring themes, patterns, or concepts and then describing and interpreting those categories. Of course, in qualitative research, the data collected qualitatively can also be analyzed quantitatively. This happens when the researcher first examines the qualitative data thoroughly to find the relevant themes and ideas and then converts them into numerical data for further comparison and evaluation.

All five articles in this issue of *Language Teaching Research* report research that involves qualitative and naturalistic data without any intervention or manipulation of variables. They have obtained data through various data collection tools such as classroom observation, field notes, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, etc. However, some have taken a more descriptive approach, focusing on describing what has happened and analyzing the data quantitatively. Others have adopted a more qualitative approach, gathering data from various qualitative sources and also analyzing them qualitatively.

This first article is one that can be said to have adopted a descriptive research design. Nakatsukasa and Loewen conducted a study to understand how a language teacher used the L1 in an L2 classroom. Data were collected through video-recording 12 hours of classroom interaction. The analysis involved segmenting the interaction data into different focus on form episodes (FFE), coding them according to the type of language used and linguistic focus, and calculating their frequencies. Chi-square statistics were used to examine the relationship between the two. To gain further insight into the various patterns of L1 use, they also used additional qualitative analysis of the FFEs observed. The findings demonstrated that both the L1 and L2 were used in the course of instruction but the degree to which they were used varied depending on the linguistic foci of the FFEs.

Kelly and Bruen investigated university teachers' and students' attitudes towards the use of translation as a pedagogical tool in a higher education institution in Ireland. This study is qualitative in nature, both in terms of the types of data and the analysis of the data. Data came from semi-structured interviews with teachers, reviews of course outlines and module descriptors, and evaluation of students' anonymous feedback on relevant course modules. The analysis involved identifying and interpreting relevant themes and concepts in the interview data, examination of the language module descriptors, and also evaluation of students' feedback. The results demonstrated that both the teachers and the students had a very positive attitude towards the use of translation in the classrooms, although few explicit references had been made to such practices in course outlines or module descriptors.

Ghanem's study explored the relationship between language instructors' native speaker/nonnative speaker (NS/NNS) identities and their teaching practices, in particular, with regard to teaching culture. This study is also qualitative, both in terms of the types of data and analysis of the data. Data were collected from four NSs and four NNSs of German at a university in the US using a number of data collection tools, including questionnaires, field notes from classroom observations, self-reflective journal entries, a focus-group interview, and semi-guided interviews. The data were analyzed qualitatively using grounded theory and discursive psychology. The findings revealed that teacher identity (being a NS or NNS) played a significant role in their teaching, particularly with regard to teaching culture.

Gu and Benson conducted a study to examine how pre service teachers developed their identities as language teachers and how social and contextual factors influenced the construction of such identities in two different educational settings: Hong Kong and mainland China. The study was motivated by the idea that teachers' identities are discursively constructed and influenced by social and contextual factors. Qualitative data were collected through focus group and semi-structured interviews with seven teachers from Hong Kong and nine from mainland China. The data were analyzed qualitatively by progressively searching for themes and patterns in the data. Another interesting qualitative component of this study was that further follow-up interviews were also arranged with participants to check, confirm and clarify the emerging themes in the data. The findings revealed a complex interplay between individual teachers' formation of their identities as language teachers and various social, contextual, and discursive factors.

The final article can be said to be more descriptive in nature, although it also has a substantial qualitative component. Lamb and Wedell's study concerns learners' perspectives on inspiring teaching that "motivates pupils to study autonomously, in their own time [and] of their own volition beyond the classroom." Data were obtained in two schools in Asia: Guangzhou, China and Jakarta, Indonesia. They were collected through an open-item survey of 279 English learners who were asked to nominate inspiring teachers and to indicate their characteristics, follow up classroom observations and interviews with some of the teachers. Learner responses to the survey were analyzed quantitatively using Chi-square tests to determine if there were any differences in the learners' responses from the two schools. Inspiring teaching was not commonly reported but when learners reported inspiring teaching, they enumerated a range of teacher characteristics related to teaching methodology, teacher personality, and rapport with students. Some differences, however, were observed in the learners' responses from the two schools. Follow-up observation of the classrooms further showed that although inspiring teachers were found to be highly motivated, their teaching varied differently according to context, confirming that context plays a role in how both learners and teachers conceive of inspiring pedagogy.

Altogether, the articles in this issue of the journal offer good examples of qualitative and descriptive research and the different ways in which the data in such research are collected and analyzed. As noted earlier, some of the studies have collected qualitative data and have analyzed them quantitatively. Such studies may be characterized as using what is called a "mixed methods research design." However, mixed methods research is not any research that has qualitative and quantitative components or research that collects data qualitatively and analyzes it quantitatively. Instead, it is a rigorous use and integration of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (e.g., experimental research integrated with qualitative research) or collection of qualitative and quantitative data from different sources, such as quantitative test data along with qualitative interview data, to find out if findings from the two sources converge (Creswell, 2015; Springer, 2010). If we go by this definition, although some of the studies here involve both qualitative and quantitative elements or meet some of the criteria of mixed methods, none of them may provide a robust example of mixed methods research.

References

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